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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: Uproar Follows Plan to Relocate German Crime Bureau

1. SUMMARY. Protests against the German government's surprise proposal to relocate to Berlin much of the BKA (Bundeskriminalamt - German equivalent of the FBI) have prompted the Interior Ministry to back down for the moment. Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD/Social Democrat) announced in early January that the terrorism and transnational crime offices of the BKA would move to Berlin in order to better coordinate the German response on these issues. Under the plan, the BKA would move 2500 jobs from Wiesbaden to Berlin and close its subsidiary in Bonn-Meckenheim (1000 employees). Critics (some within Schily's own party) argue that the move to Berlin would damage the BKA as an organization, cost at least EUR 500 million (USD 625 million), and threaten German federalism. END SUMMARY.

2. On January 8, Interior Minister Otto Schily announced a plan to relocate the BKA's terrorism and transnational crime units from Wiesbaden (Hesse) and Meckenheim (North Rhine-Westphalia - NRW) to Berlin over the next four years. Schily asserted that the move would facilitate cooperation between the BKA and other German law enforcement agencies, citing difficulties last year coordinating the response to the kidnapping of German tourists in northern Africa.

Opposition Loud and Wide

3. Reaction to Schily's announcement was immediate and overwhelmingly negative. Hesse Minister-President (M-P) Roland Koch (CDU/Christian Democrat) blasted Schily for not informing him beforehand and called the move "outrageous" and politically motivated. Critics from within Schily's own party, including NRW Minister-President Peer Steinbrueck, have been almost as vocal. Steinbrueck wrote a letter to Chancellor Schroeder on the matter calling for reconsideration of the relocation plans. In an unusual move, federal Development Aid Minister Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul (SPD) spoke to 6000 protesters at a rally in Wiesbaden on January 24, criticizing Schily for not consulting the cabinet and demanding that Schily withdraw the relocation plan. Many BKA employees have vigorously opposed the move, claiming that they were "hoodwinked" by BKA leadership.

4. In a letter to minister-presidents in the other fifteen German states, Koch argued that the BKA move would call into question Germany's strong tradition of federalism and potentially jeopardize other federal agencies around Germany, including the German Supreme Court (Karlsruhe), Federal Labor Office (Nuremberg), and Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Cologne). Koch has received support from other minister-presidents, notably Rheinland-Pfalz M-P Kurt Beck (a locally popular SPD figure with strong party connections) and Bavarian M-P Edmund Stoiber.

5. Media critics point to the high cost of the relocation (at least 500 million euros) and question whether the move would make the BKA more effective. Schily took hits from all around, as Schroeder hesitated to back the plan and news media obtained a videotape of a high-level BKA meeting, casting BKA leadership in a negative light. Schily has committed to reconsider the proposal "from the ground up"; political observers expect BKA president Kersten to lose his job over the controversy.

6. COMMENT: Schily's failure to seek cabinet approval or consult state politicians before announcing the plan has left him isolated against a strong and bipartisan tide of opposition. A strong BKA is a critical component of German cooperation in the war on terror, and the ongoing debate over the proposed move to Berlin could hamper the agency's operational effectiveness, whatever the merits of Schily's plans to bring all terrorism-fighting agencies together in one city. Schily's announcement follows a decision last year to move the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND - Germany's equivalent of the CIA) from Pullach (near Munich) to Berlin. Concerns over upheaval within the BKA, the high cost of relocation, and political fallout in the important states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse may sink the idea for good. END COMMENT.